

Convoy of Hope expands outreach to needy

The ministry, known for holding local compassion fairs around the country, is touching Asia, Europe and beyond

For most of its seven years, Convoy of Hope (CH) has been known for its Saturday outreaches that provide food for the body as well as the soul. In all, CH has ministered to more than 2 million people, with more than 600,000 of them making decisions to accept Christ as Savior.

More and more, CH is expanding its reach, both geographically and logistically.

This year, for instance, CH has responded to needs in Moldova, Kosovo, the Philippines, Mexico and the Republic of Georgia. Sometimes the organization sends food; other times it sends medical and school supplies.

In El Salvador, CH has built shelters for people displaced by an earthquake. In the United States, Convoy has sent cleaning supplies in the wake of flooding in Houston and West Virginia.

Saturday food distribution events are still a major part of the interdenominational ministry, but there is much more to CH than grocery giveaways.

As a result of bridging political and religious boundaries in Dallas, CH conducted in March its largest domestic outreach in the ministry's history. Relations have been cemented to the point where local churches have agreed to establish long-

lasting compassion ministries to reach the community.

A divergent mixture of churches, social agencies, civic groups, and city and state government offices came together in Fair Park to achieve the event. In all, 14,547 “honored guests” attended, with 3,170 deciding to make Jesus Christ their Savior. The event marked the first of two dozen U.S. outreaches by CH this year.

In addition to obtaining 14 nonperishable items, families also could partake of lunch, concerts, debt counseling, medical screening, a job fair and a children’s carnival—all for free. But, most important, before they returned home they heard a message of hope.

Mike Ennis, CH executive vice president, said, “Groceries aren’t going to change a life for eternity. But the love of Jesus will.”

Rick DuBose, pastor of the Assemblies of God church in the suburb of Sachse, and associate pastor Scot Cockcroft coordinated the event, which involved distributing 200,000 pounds of food. About 1,860 volunteers from 106 churches of various denominations and 46 organizations participated, doing everything from presenting puppet shows to extracting teeth.

The daylong event was designed to allow families to have fun and togetherness, with pony rides for children, job-placement tents for adults and more. Dozens of health professionals volunteered their services, including physicians, dentists, chiropractors and pharmacists.

The compassion of CH impressed Michael Johnson, who has been

living in shelters with his wife.

"We're being treated as humans, not homeless," he said of CH. "A lot of churches and ministries look down their noses at homeless people and try to yank us around by the arm." He said CH volunteers had treated him with love and dignity.

Convoy erected a separate tent to minister to Spanish-speaking guests, complete with Latin rhythm music. In all, 3,500 Spanish-speaking visitors participated. The event had heavy promotion on Spanish-speaking TV and radio stations and in newspapers.

Antonio Bosch, pastor of the Potter's Wheel, an independent full-gospel church in Dallas, said there had never been such a transdenominational effort in the city that specifically reached out to non-English-speaking Latinos. "Instead of being a denominational deal, we're being the church of Dallas," Bosch said.

J.D. Mora, pastor of the full-gospel Templo Emanuel in Dallas, said CH did a good job of reaching newly arrived immigrants who need to find God. "This isn't about a certain religion or the name of a certain church," Mora said.

However, the CH gathering is not an end in itself. "I've met great pastors who have such a heart to serve God," Cockcroft said. Out of this cooperative effort, local congregations plan to start neighborhood Centers of Hope, which will distribute food and clothing, provide after-school programs and job assistance, and preach the gospel.

Victor Smith, president of the Dallas branch of the National

Association for the Advancement of Colored People, lauded CH before the outreach. "You have proven that you are your brother's keeper," Smith said. "I've never seen such an act of unity and compassion to the people in this city."

The effort this year has resulted in the scheduling of seven CH outreaches in north Texas in 2002. CH operations are headquartered in Springfield, Mo. The ministry has 30 employees, but relies on about 20,000 volunteers annually.

-John W. Kennedy in Dallas